

## 230: Draconian encounters

An oppressive silence filled the cavern after Scarlett spoke, as though she had challenged the very sky.

She found herself unable to suppress the surge of indignation and defiance that had risen up inside her. The stifling force bearing down on her felt as if asserting its authority felt like a direct challenge to her core essence. The kind of response to which death should be preferable over bowing down.

Suddenly, the atmosphere grew more intense, accompanied by the temperature rising even further around Scarlett. For a moment, Scarlett felt as though an entire mountain was weighing down on her, yet her legs didn't fail. It only fueled the fiery defiance that was building up inside her.

Just as all of that anger and displeasure was about to boil over, Scarlett caught herself, barely avoiding the desire to say something she really *would* regret.

She took a deep breath, trying to force down as much of her temper as she could.

It probably wouldn't be wise to provoke an ancient dragon any more than necessary.

Having regained at least some of her composure, despite the unrelenting pressure, Scarlett focused on the glowing wall of red stone before her.

“Greetings, Aylazkreh, esteemed guardian of the molten peaks. I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford, a noble of the Graenal Empire. Pardon my earlier outburst, but if I may ask, is there a reason why you asked me to *halt*?”

She couldn't completely avoid a hint of sharpness bleeding into her last words, betraying some of her efforts to remain diplomatic.

A tense silence followed, and then the cavern shook as if some massive entity stirred within the depths of the volcano.

Scarlett was slightly surprised by that. It seemed that the dragon was more awake than she thought it would have been at this point.

“...*I have not heard of you before,*” boomed a voice, now echoing around the cavern rather than inside Scarlett's mind. “*Why does a human noble trespass in my domain? Your presence has disturbed my slumber.*”

“I was investigating affairs related to the Zuverian outpost on this isle and seized the opportunity to visit. My intent was merely driven by curiosity. Such legendary lairs as yours are rare within the empire.”

“*They are not rare. They are nonexistent, excluding mine.*”

“Perhaps, but then you would have to ignore Olgolzkreh's lair,” Scarlett said.

*"He is but a shadow of what he once was,"* Ayrilazkreh replied.

"Hmm. I suppose that is true enough."

After ravaging the empire's lands seven years prior, Olgolzkreh had become significantly weakened, after all.

*"It is,"* the dragon said. *"It is also irrelevant to your presence here. You justify your intrusion with mere curiosity. If this is the truth, then you should be prepared to face the repercussions of such frivolous reasoning."*

The overbearing force bearing down on Scarlett grew. She steadied herself, jaw clenching slightly as her gaze focused on the wall steadily. "If you deem yourself able to enforce those repercussions, then so be it. I stand ready."

Ayrilazkreh had already confirmed that it had just been in its slumber. The dragon couldn't do anything without actually leaving its lair, and that wasn't something it could do just like that.

Around Scarlett, the temperature rose even further, and the cave trembled, threatening to collapse. Scarlett had to use her pyrokinesis to deal with the heat, but she wouldn't let herself bend here.

Suddenly, the pressure lifted and things calmed down.

*"...You are an arrogant one,"* Ayrilazkreh rumbled.

"It is a trait often remarked upon," Scarlett replied.

*"...I will overlook this slight, but tread carefully should you consider deceiving me in the future, mortal. Do not think my tolerance has no limits simply because I have allowed your attendant to abide within my realm."*

Scarlett's prepared response to that halted, slight confusion etching a furrow into her brow. "My attendant? To whom are you referring?"

*"The little ones behind you."*

Turning, Scarlett's gaze fell on Nol'viz, her expression turning into a frown. "...She is not my attendant."

*"They are not?"* Ayrilazkreh's surprise in that was evident, even through its booming voice. *"Then that is even less reason for you to roam this place, Baroness of Hartford."*

Scarlett faced the glowing wall once more. "What led you to believe I was associated with her?"

*"They bear your stain."*

Scarlett's expression hardened. "...I am afraid that I do not understand what you mean by that. Could you elaborate?"

For a short while, there was no answer, until eventually, Ayrilazkreh seemed to correct itself. *"It appears I was mistaken. While there are similarities, the marks differ. You are not of the Cabal."* The pressure on Scarlett returned in full force. *"What are you?"*

Scarlett endured the brunt of this new assault, her forehead knitted in thought.

It seemed as if Ayrilazkreh could sense her fate-altering power, similar to how Godwin could. That's likely why it had assumed she was with the Cabal, and that Nol'viz was her attendant. Was it perhaps also the reason why her presence here had caught its attention when its slumber shouldn't have been broken so easily?

Glancing back towards Nol'viz, who stood near the mouth of the cavern, Scarlett found the girl studying her with a penetrating look.

"...As far as you have to be concerned, Ayrilazkreh," Scarlett began, addressing the dragon again, "you can consider me merely another noble of the humans' empire. Our paths are unlikely to intersect again, rendering any further details about me of no consequence to you."

The pressure on her intensified, testing Scarlett's resilience. A flicker of a grimace crossed her face as she withstood the aggressive force, but eventually, it receded back into nothingness. *"You should consider yourself fortunate that my time has yet to come."*

"Fortune plays no part in it," Scarlett said.

The dragon's response held a hint of disdain. *"Take your leave, mortal, or whatever you claim to be."*

Scarlett remained silent for a few seconds, then spoke. "My intention was to depart before you yourself asked me to stay. I would be happy to leave, but first, one of your earlier comments has piqued my curiosity." Her gaze sharpened. "What did you mean to imply when you said you had allowed the girl to abide in your realm? You are aware that she is a member of the Hallowed Cabal, are you not? Do you have an arrangement with them?"

The cavern trembled once more. *"Accusing me of such alliances? I maintain no connections to that pack."*

"Yet you have acknowledged permitting one of their numbers to stay in your domain?"

*"Those are separate matters."*

Scarlett looked back at Nol'viz. "What ties do you have with Ayrilazkreh and this place?" she asked.

She didn't remember anything in particular related to Nol'viz and this location from the game. That raised the question if this was a new development or not. Given that the girl had probably inherited the fate-defying power that some of the Cabal members purportedly had, it wasn't impossible for her to cause some deviations from the game's original narrative. Scarlett just didn't know exactly how such changes might take shape.

Nol'viz tilted her head, her trio of violet eyes blinking in unison. "We do not know," she answered.

Scarlett frowned. Before she could inquire further, however, Ayrilazkreh's voice filled the cave.

*"Those are not your affairs to involve yourself in,"* the dragon warned. *"If you do not provide your own truths at my behest, then do not expect any in return."*

"...Very well," Scarlett conceded. She wanted to argue with that, but she couldn't, really. "Nonetheless, you should exercise due caution in anything that relates to the Cabal. Their intentions towards you, should they get the chance, might echo what befell Olgolzkreh."

*"Do not presume this one a fool, Baroness of Hartford. The ambitions of the Cabal are clear to me, as is their disdain for me and mine. I harbor no affection for them or their nametaker, so your warning is unnecessary."*

"If that is what you believe, then so be it. I simply suggest that you do not forget your own words." Scarlett paused for a bit, then began to turn around. "I shall take my leave now. While I do not expect our paths to cross again soon, this encounter has been enlightening. Farewell."

*"We shall see whether we meet again. If we do, I expect you to have tempered your arrogance in my presence,"* Ayrilazkreh's voice resounded behind her. With that, the dragon's imposing aura seemed to dissipate, and it felt as if a valve inside Scarlett finally relaxed.

Approaching Nol'viz, Scarlett stopped to observe the girl for a moment. Nol'viz's impassive mask faced her in silence.

"It seems you harbor secrets beyond my expectations," Scarlett said.

"So do you," the girl responded in her echoing voice of whispers.

Scarlett passed her by, proceeding to exit the cave, with Nol'viz trailing behind. She did still keep an eye on the girl, but she doubted Nol'viz would act against her by this point.

Exiting the entrance to Ayrilazkreh's lair through the narrow ravine, Scarlett reflected on the encounter. When coming here, she hadn't at all anticipated conversing with an ancient dragon.

She recognized that it hadn't exactly been the *best* first impression. The other party was an incredibly formidable creature capable of destroying her with a mere gesture in normal cases, but her conduct hadn't really reflected that.

She *had* tried not to offend Ayrilazkreh. At least to a certain degree. But it was difficult holding herself back when it was almost ingrained in her very nature to confront any and all who believed themselves her better.

That went even for when they probably *were* her better in most regards.

This encounter could potentially come back to haunt her later on, especially when Ayrilazkreh fully awakened from its slumber. It would probably be wise to factor this into her plans concerning the dragon.

Ideally, she hoped to avoid any sort of fight with Ayrilazkreh in the future. Such an event would be disastrous on multiple levels. Sure, she had entertained the notion of facing off against an ancient dragon at some point, but Ayrilazkreh was not the dragon she had in mind. Her sights were set on Olgolzkreh, the ‘Dragon of Devastation’. After all, Olgolzkreh was already nearing the end of its life, and it already had history with Fynn. That confrontation was inevitable in some shape or form.

But Scarlett would be perfectly content limiting her interactions with Ayrilazkreh to the absolute minimum.

Once Scarlett had exited the ravine, the lake surrounding the Resting Eye stretching out beyond the isle and the volcano located behind her, Scarlett stopped and turned back to face Nol’viz. The girl halted, considering her in return.

Scarlett had accomplished what she came for, leaving nothing else for her to explore before her return to Freybrook. This trip had unveiled more surprises than anticipated, both in revelations about the potential existence of a player-like character and the unexpected encounter with an ancient dragon.

Where all of that would lead was uncertain, but Scarlett would need to wait for further information before drawing any conclusions.

She found herself observing Nol’viz intently for a few seconds.

It would have been nice if she could at least have uncovered more about the girl’s reason for being here. All Scarlett had managed to discern was that it was connected to Ayrilazkreh in some way while probably unrelated to the Hallowed Cabal. That didn’t tell her much, though.

“Do we confuse you?” Nol’viz asked, looking up at Scarlett questioningly.

Scarlett eyed her for a moment longer before shaking her head. “I hope you found whatever you sought in shadowing me around today. I will now be taking my leave. Our paths are unlikely to cross again in the near future.”

Nol’viz met her gaze quietly. “We did not expect you here today.”

“I was not under the assumption that you did.”

“You were not as dangerous as we thought.”

Scarlett paused, staring at the girl. A soft chuckle left her lips. “Perhaps not. For now. Do not be surprised if that evaluation of yours shifts eventually.”

She produced the translucent crystal that functioned as the anchor for Dean Godwin’s teleportation spell. As Nol’viz watched with an eerie stillness, Scarlett lifted the crystal in the air.

“I presume that you will inform the Cabal of today’s events. Should you do so, kindly suggest they refrain from thinking too deeply about my motives for coming here. Such inquiries will likely only lead them into a labyrinth of speculation, and I would prefer if they did not grow *too* paranoid about me. Everything has a balance.”

Though Nol’viz didn’t respond, Scarlett suspected the girl would convey her message quite thoroughly.

“Thus I take my leave.”

Shattering the crystal, Scarlett broke the spell that had brought her here, and the scenery around her transformed.